DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 184 018 CG 014 247

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TITLE Aging and Alienation: A Fresh Look.
PUB DATE 79
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society (32nd, Washington, DC, November 25-29, 1979). Research supported by the Iowa Multi-Disciplinary Gerontology Council.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Age Differences; *Aging (Individuals); *Alienation; College Students; Comparative Analysis; *Environmental Influences; Life Style; *Living Standards; Older Adults; *Place of Residence
IDENTIFIERS *Dean Alienation Scale

ABSTRACT

The effects of three levels of living conditions for two age groups of individuals were examined relative to sub- and total-alienation scores as measured by the Dean Alienation Scale. Subjects were 38 older adults and 42 college students. The young adults felt more isolated than the elderly, and nursing home residents felt more powerless and normless than either young adults or independent elderly. The least alienated group were the independent elderly, and young adults felt more normless and alienated than did the independent elderly. There were no significant differences between the groups for scores on total alienation. (Author)

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ED184018

Aging and Alienation: A Fresh Look[1]

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Running Head: Aging and alienation

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Aging and Alienation: A Fresh Look

Summary

Feeling alienated is a common experience. In the last century, and especially in the last decade or so, alienation has seemed to be a frequent concomitant of youthful life. It has also been a popular belief in recent times that old people are alienated because they are rejected by society. It was the purpose of this study to evaluate the effect of living conditions and age on feelings of alienation.

Persons studied included 38 elderly men and women, and 42 young college age men and women. These subjects formed three groups: the young group living in normal college and private housing, an elderly group of 10 residing in five different nursing homes, and the remaining 28 elderly participants temporarily visiting campus to attend Elderhostel (Elderhostel is a special educational program for older persons, held on college and university campuses in the summer.)

Alienation was evaluated by the Dean Alienation Scale, a device that has been used to measure that phenomenon in a number of studies in the past two decades. The instrument is untimed, and was administered to subjects individually. It was hypothesized that levels of alienation would be significantly greater for elderly than for young adults, and that individuals in less constrained, more independent living conditions would exhibit less alienation than would persons whose living circumstances were more dependent. No sex differences were assumed.

In general, the alienation hypotheses were not supported: There were no significant differences between the groups for scores on total alienation. The Dean instrument includes sub-scales for feelings of isolation, powerlessness and normlessness; young adults indicated more feelings of isolation than did the elderly adults, but no differences were found on the powerlessness or

normlessness subscales between the young and old.

Within the older groups, the nursing home subjects showed significantly more feelings of powerlessness, normlessness and alienation than did the Elderhostel group. There was no sex difference on scales within the total elderly population. Young males expressed somewhat higher scores on normlessness than did young females, but no other sex differences appeared in this group.

The study supports others' findings that "old" does not mean "alienated", even among nursing home populations, though the latter recognize the loss of control and independence in their lives. We need to attend to the circumstances of individual lives, not the ages of the persons concerned.

Feeling alienated is apparently not an uncommon aspect of the human condition. From Goethe's 19th Century Werther (Goethe, 1971), through Scott Fitzgerald's "lost generation of the 1920s, to the drop-outs of the 1960s, to be young has been tantamount to being alienated, for a substantial segment of the population. It is also a popular generalization that the aged are segregated, isolated, separated from the mainstream and thus alienated too. Simone deBeauvoir, discussing Jonathan Swift's Struldbrugs, comments that Swift's 18th Century was the first time that progress and change was so rapid that simply by living into old age a person could be left behind, "solitary, shut in, deprived of everything that is moving away from him" (deBeauvoir, 1970, pp 283-4).

Since the experience of alienation is so common, it is not surprising that the concept has been the focus of considerable speculation and investigation by social scientists. One current concept of alienation is that of Seeman (1959) who classifies the general term into five sub-classes: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement.

The concept of social isolation was traced to Durkheim by DeGrazia (1948) and is conceptualized as "a feeling of separation from the group or isolation from group standards" (p. 3). A brief definition of powerlessness is provided by Kris and Leites (1950): "ordinary individuals have ever less the feeling that they can understand or influence the very events upon which their life and happiness is known to depend." (p. 283). A third component of alienation, normlessness, is defined by DeGrazia (1948) as a "painful uneasiness or anxiety, a feeling of separation from group standards, a feeling of pointlessness that no certain goals exist" (p. 3). Normlessness has also been interpreted by Horney (1949) as the representation of a conflict between the ethics which stimulate one to strive toward a constantly higher material standard of living versus the practical denial of a high standard for many people. This second view incorporates the stuggle of freedom in an individual who is faced with

factual limitations on behavior (Dean, 1961).

The three elements cited: powerlessness, normlessness and isolation, were investigated by Dean (1961) to determine what empirical relationships, if any, existed among the several components of alienation. Scales constructed to measure these components inter-correlated from .4 to .67 (n = 384). Dean (1961) found a low but statistically significant negative correlation bwtween the three components of alienation and occupational prestige, education, income and rural background. There was a small but positive correlation between alienation and advancing age.

While there exists a substantial body of literature relative to the measurement of alienation for various subgroups of the population in general (Mather & Black, 1978; LeParte, 1977; Gladding, 1977; Lee, 1974; Wilson, 1971; Burback & Thompson, 1973; Harris, 1971; Dean, 1978, 1968, 1961; Elmore, 1967; Bell, 1957) the construct of alienation has not been explored within the context of aging. What has been lacking in gerontological literature is a systematic investigation of factors other than the powerful situational elements of health and income which affect life satisfaction among older persons. There is sufficient theoretical and empirical justification to suggest that the phenomenon of alienation and the subcomponents of isolation, powerlessness and normlessness should be considered within the context of life experience of the elderly (Mindel and Vaughn, 1978; Backman, 1973; Chatfield, 1977).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the feelings of isolation, powerlessness, normlessness and total alienation among two groups of elderly persons and a representative group of young college adults. The working hypotheses were: (1) levels of alienation and its subcomponents are significantly greater for elderly adults when compared to young adults; (2) individuals with less constrained, more independent living conditions will exhibit lower scores of alienation as well as lower sub-component scores than those persons who are

more dependent; (3) within the elderly and young adult age groups, there are no sex differences relative to levels of alienation and the sub-scores of isolation, powerlessness and normlessness.

Method

Subjects

Thirty-eight elderly males and females and forty-two young college age males and females participated in the study. Ten of the elderly participants were recruited from five randomly selected nursing homes in the central Iowa area. Twenty-eight of the elderly participants were randomly selected from participants in the Elderhostel program held on a central Iowa university campus. (Elderhostel is a special educational program for senior citizens which is held for one week at a time on university and junior college campuses throughout the nation.) The remaining forty-two younger participants were university student volunteers enrolled in undergraduate psychology classes. Demographic data relative to sample size, age and years of education for the participants are summarized in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Procedures

The Dean Alienation Scale (Dean, 1961) was administered to all participants. Dean's scale consists of 24 Likert-type items classified *a priori* into three sub-scales of isolation, powerlessness, and normlessness. When the three sub-scale scores are summed, a measure of total alienation is obtained. A low score on each of the scales is more favorable than a high score. Dean (1961) concluded that, although each subscale belonged to the same general concept, there was enough independence among the sub-scales to warrant treating them as independent variables.

Hensley, Hensley and Munro (1975), following Dodder (1969) attempted to

test and verify the scales developed by Dean (1961) in order to ascertain that the scales to measure alienation do assess that concept. A comparison of factors across the samples of both Dodder (1969) and Hensley, Hensley and Munro (1975) indicated that, although the factors that emerged did not emerge in the same order as in Dean (1961), alienation can be considered to be a relatively stable personality construct and that Dean's scale, whatever it measures, does so with some consistency.

There was no time limit to complete the scale. All participants completed the scale individually and responses were anonymous. Scores were obtained for each of the sub-scales by summing the responses for each item of the sub-scale. A total alienation score was obtained by finding the sum of the isolation, powerlessness and normlessness variables.

Results

Young and Elderly Adults on All Dimensions

A 2 (age group) by 4 (component score) conventional analysis of variance for unequal cell sizes (Kirk, 1968) was used to analyze the scores on Dean's Alienation Scale (Dean, 1961) for the entire group of elderly participants and the young adults. There was a significant effect for age group in the sub-scale for isolation $F(1, 78) = 9.41$, $p < .003$ with the young adults ($\bar{X} = 26.52$, $sd = 4.82$) indicating more feelings of isolation than the elderly adults ($\bar{X} = 22.78$, $sd = 6.04$). There were no differences between the groups for scores in the dimensions of powerlessness, normlessness or total alienation.

Effect of Living Condition on Scores

A 3 (living condition) by 4 (component score) conventional analysis of variance for unequal cell sizes was also completed in order to determine if living conditions would influence the levels of isolation, powerlessness, normlessness and alienation. There was a significant effect for the dimensions of isolation $F(2, 77) = 4.74$, $p < .01$, powerlessness $F(2, 77) = 2.96$, $p < .05$,

normlessness F (2, 77) = 4.50, $p < .01$ and alienation F (2, 77) = 3.91, $p < .02$. The means and standard deviations for the sub-score components are summarized in Table 2. Tukey's test for comparing means of unequal cell sizes was performed on the mean scores in all dimensions.

Insert Table 2 about here

Isolation. In this dimension the young adults felt significantly ($p < .01$) more isolated than either the nursing home elderly or the participants in the Elderhostel program. There were no differences between the two elderly groups on the isolation dimension.

Powerlessness. The nursing home elderly felt significantly ($p < .01$) more powerless than either the Elderhostel participants or the young adults. There were no differences between the young adults and the Edlerhostel volunteers relative to feelings of powerlessness.

Normlessness. On this dimension, the nursing home elderly felt significantly ($p < .01$) more normless than either the Elderhostel participants or the young adults. In addition, the young adults felt significantly ($p < .05$) more normless than the Elderhostel participants.

Alienation. The nursing home participants expressed significantly greater ($p < .01$) feelings of alienation than did the Elderhostel participants. Young adults felt significantly ($p < .05$) more alienated than did the Elderhostel participants. There were no significant differences in expressed levels of alienation between the young adults and nursing home residents.

Sex Differences of Elderly on All Dimensions

A 2 (sex) by 4 (component score) conventional analysis of variance for unequal cell sizes was completed on data exclusively from both groups of elderly participants. There were no sex differences among the elderly participants

relative to the sub-score components of isolation, powerlessness, normlessness, or total alienation.

A separate similar analysis was completed on data from the sample of Elderhostel participants alone. For this sub-group there was a significant sex differences effect for the normlessness sub-scale $F(1, 26) = 3.23$, $p < .08$. In this instance the elderly males ($\bar{X} = 15.60$, $sd = 5.33$) exhibited higher normlessness scores than elderly females ($\bar{X} = 12.88$, $sd = 2.69$). There were no sex differences for the scores relative to isolation, powerlessness or total alienation within this Elderhostel participant sample.

Sex Differences for Young Adults

The conventional analysis of variance for unequal cell sizes was utilized again to examine the relationship between sex and component scores for the sample of young adults. There was a significant effect for the normlessness scale for this group as well ($F(1, 40) = 3.89$, $p < .05$. A pattern similar to that for the Elderhostel males emerged as the young males ($\bar{X} = 17.18$, $sd = 6.45$) expressed higher scores in this domain than the young females ($\bar{X} = 14.76$, $sd = 3.87$). There were no sex differences for the college sample in the dimensions of isolation, powerlessness or alienation.

Discussion

The myth that "old" is "alienated" has been attacked in Shanas' (1979) study of family relations of old people: the evidence from her study contradicts the belief that aged persons are alienated from their families. She found that they were not rejected, and where they had no children, a family substitution pattern emerges in order to meet the interpersonal needs of the aging individual. Shanas (1979) asked why young persons who live alone are not regarded as alienated as well as solitary old persons. Her point is well taken as, with respect to the sub-scale scores evaluating social isolation, the young adults in this sample exhibited significantly more feelings of overall isolation than did the

total group of elderly individuals. This implies that living condition may have a larger impact on feelings of isolation than does the factor of age.

Based on a sample representing three modes of living among two age groups whose level of educational attainment is similar it appears that no general conclusions relative to alienation for a single living style emerge. The young adults appear to feel more isolated than either the nursing home residents or the Elderhostel participants. There are no differences between the two elderly sub-populations relative to isolation. Apparently nursing home residents are accepting of the family substititution pattern emerging in the nursing home and social lonliness is not a complaint for this sample of elderly residents. The Elderhostel participants do not feel isolated and apparently are self-sufficient in maintaining adequate levels of social stimulation.

The dimension of power, or lack of it, presents a different point of view. In this instance the nursing home residents feel less in control of their lives. Factors which contributed to their individual feelings of self-sufficient happiness no longer exist. The young adults and the more independent Elderhostel elderly indicate more control over their lives and exhibit no differences in the powerlessness dimension.

Despite the regimen present in group living situations both the nursing home residents and the young college residents felt separated from group standards, thus producing scores significantly higher in the normlessness dimension than those recorded for the independent elderly. DeGrazia (1948) characterized this dimension as one in which individuals feel that life has a tendency to be pointless and that no certain goals exist. Providing opportunities for both young adults and nursing home residents to set and achieve mutually established goals may reduce expressed feelings of anxiety engendered by adjustment to the normative schedules present in group living situations.

The impact of the three sub-scales is present on the total alienation

dimension. Overall, the nursing home population and the young adults both felt more alienated than did the independent elderly. Feelings of alienation were similar for both the nursing home residents and the young adults. It is conjectured that a combination of judgmental wisdom and living conditions which serve to foster free and judicious exercise of that wisdom serve to permit the independent elderly to exercise more control over their lives. Feeling alienated, isolated, powerless or normless was not within the scope of reality for this group of active elderly.

From a developmental viewpoint, the young adults were struggling to acquire power, establish norms, and attempt independent living while placed in a new, alien living situation. They were moving from one set of predetermined parental guidelines to establishment of their own autonomous set. The nursing home elderly, at the other end of the aging spectrum, were struggling with a transition that was requiring them to surrender their carefully cultivated levels of power, guidelines for living and autonomous independence. The reward for slowly surrendering these accumulated benefits from life is more life. An awareness that transitions relative to these dimensions are occurring for these two widely separated age groups might serve as the basis for establishing effective dialogue between them.

In searching for any unique effects of sex within the variables under consideration it was found that elderly men and young men expressed higher levels of normlessness than did the women in either group. Retired men, no matter how socially active, appear to be less affected than similarly aged women by role models and guidelines for acceptable behavior. Goal setting can be a difficult experience for a retired man while the role of women remains essentially defined for post-retirement years. The young man too is similarly plagued with the need to make decisions having a life-long impact. In general these decisions are made with little external guidance, and few rules exist to aid in making the

decisions. Although more of today's women may be faced with the same decisions, apparently the women in this sample did not feel such a lack of standards for living.

From an applied perspective the results suggest that there are some aspects of alienation which may be reduced through minor variations in lifestyles particulary for nursing home residents and young adults. Isolation is not as much a problem as it is a myth which, as Shanas (1979) suggests, needs to be dispelled. Feelings of powerlessness can be reduced by careful assessment by a group living staff, relative to these variables that must be regimented and those areas in which freedom of decision-making can occur. Establishment of communication-skill groups within congregate living situations can aid in helping individuals establish personal norms within the living situation. Finding others with similar values and feelings can also decrease normlessness and foster friendship and mutual growth patterns. It is hoped that the present study will stimulate further research in intervention processes designed to reduce the impact of the sub-variables within Dean's (1961) Alienation Scale, and will stimulate other researchers to consider more carefully other similarities which may exist between young and older adults as they interact during major transition points in the developmental patterns of their lives.

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Table 1. Demographic comparisons of participants in alienation study.

Living Condition	Sample Size		Age		Years of Education	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Nursing Home	1	9	63.00	84.10	18.00	11.22
Elderhostel	10	18	73.40	68.88	14.60	14.44
College Students	16	26	19.18	19.03	12.75	12.03
Total	N = 80					

Table 2. Mean scores and standard deviations for the dimensions of isolation, powerlessness, normlessness and alienation for three groups of adults as measured by Dean's Alienation Scale (Dean, 1961).

Living Condition	Isolation		Powerlessness		Normlessness		Alienation	
Nursing Home	23.40	4.97	28.70	7.24	18.30	5.14	70.40	15.04
Elderhostel	22.57	6.45	23.67	5.31	13.85	3.97	60.10	12.76
College Student	26.52	4.82	25.16	5.38	15.69	3.99	67.38	11.41
Maximum Score	Total = 45		Total = 45		Total = 30		Total = 120	

Note: A low score on all dimensions is more favorable than a high score.